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DEPARTMENT FOR DS/DSS/OSAC, DS/IP/AF, DS/DSS/ITA,  
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SUBJECT: ANNUAL CRIME SAFETY REPORT - FREETOWN 2009

REF: STATE 168473

All travelers and American citizens residing in Sierra Leone should consult the Department of State's website, <http://travel.state.gov> for current information about the security situation in Sierra Leone.

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#### I. Overall Crime and Safety:

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The Department of State currently considers the crime rate in Sierra Leone, Freetown in particular, as high. The factors that contribute to the high crime rates are generally related to the country's continued rebuilding from the decade-long civil war. Ranked at the bottom of the UN's Human Development Index, Sierra Leone is known for endemic poverty. High unemployment rates, little investment in employment-generating industries, and the low incomes associated with resultant work in the informal sector create conditions of gross economic hardship. The cohort whose education was truncated by the war, including former combatants, lacks the skills necessary to compete in a competitive labor market. The youth population, which includes the age range of 15-35, are frequently idle and without optimism for a prosperous future. Drug and alcohol use within this group is high, and possibly increasing. The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) collaborates with a small contingent of police advisors from the United Nations Integrated Peace building Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) and together work on police-preparedness and crime prevention strategies. These strategies have produced some positive results, but overall, the SLP continues to have only moderate success in containing the criminal element in the country. Within the capital city of Freetown, nighttime robberies, assaults, petty street crime and home invasions are common. The number of violent crimes in Sierra Leone is comparable to most other West African countries, with Nigeria as the exception. In Sierra Leone, the assailants often use forceful tactics, operate in organized groups, and carry weapons to facilitate their activity, which increases the possibility of physical harm as the crime is committed. As is common in most developing countries, expatriates are frequent targets due to their appearance and perceived wealth. Therefore, it is essential that visitors to Sierra Leone have heightened awareness and take necessary security precautions.

Trafficking narcotics through Sierra Leone is an ongoing problem, in congruence with the trends in West Africa. The limited capabilities of countries to secure their borders, coupled with endemic poverty and relative close proximity to European markets makes West Africa vulnerable to organized criminal elements. This represents a threat to stability and security in Sierra Leone and the region.

While extremely challenging, road travel in Sierra Leone is possible. The streets of Freetown are narrow, crowded, and poorly maintained. The lack of streetlights, stop signs, sidewalks, and guardrails, coupled with steep hillside drop-offs and many unpaved roads increase the risk of injury and death for drivers and pedestrians. Local drivers exhibit

little consideration for pedestrians, other motorists, and traditional safe driving practices. Motorcycles are prevalent and tend to weave dangerously between cars.

The major roads connecting Freetown to outlying provincial cities and towns can be especially hazardous. These roads are usually unpaved, without lighting, and often obstructed by animals or disabled vehicles. The local drivers are also known to travel with excessive speed. During the rainy season, these dangerous conditions are exacerbated by water and mud and can pose an even greater challenge. During the dry season, dusty conditions can severely impair visibility. Roadside assistance, help from the police, and fuel stations are few and far between.

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II. Political Violence  
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Although political demonstrations and rallies are normally peaceful, spontaneous rioting and attacks may occur. In the past 12 months, there have been violent confrontations between students and police in Freetown and in the provinces.

In some instances, the SLP Crowd Control Units were mobilized and tear gas was required to control the situation. Crowds of students are notorious for becoming destructive and resorting to hooliganism after local soccer matches between rival schools. After rival sporting events, large groups of students are occasionally found vandalizing buildings and vehicles on the streets of Freetown. Political demonstrations can also become dangerous, with rival factions becoming overly aggressive towards one another and the police. Currently, there is no known organization targeting American citizens or affiliated interests in Sierra Leone. There is very little anti-American sentiment, but visitors are

FREETOWN 00000020 002 OF 004

cautioned to avoid any large crowds, public gatherings, or demonstrations. These scenarios have the potential of becoming unruly which can result in physical injury and possibly death.

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III. Post Specific Concerns  
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Sierra Leone's neighbor, Guinea, recently experienced a change in political power due to the death of President Conte. Immediately following his death, military officers assumed control of the government. Given the pervious nature of the borders, plus the numerous familial relationships that span the two countries, unrest in Guinea usually has a spillover effect on Sierra Leone. Should the situation in Guinea deteriorate, violence and an influx of refugees could create a very challenging and unstable environment in Sierra Leone. Though the SLP and the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) have contingency plans, it is possible that they will be ill-equipped to handle the full impact of a sub-regional crisis.

The increase in narcotics trafficking through Sierra Leone, with links to international organized crime syndicates, is a disturbing trend. The considerable wealth associated with the drug trade, channeled through corruption, could have a destabilizing impact on the country. Further, transiting drugs are increasingly found on the local market, adding cocaine to the more habitual usage of marijuana.

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IV. Police Response  
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Of the approximate 9,000 member Sierra Leonean Police force, there are about 2,200 armed officers who belong to the Operational Security Division (OSD). The OSD officers are armed with shoulder weapons and usually man roadside checkpoints and serve on patrol teams that respond to emergency calls. Police response has been known to be extremely slow and unreliable. It is important to note that the quality of police service tends to decline as one moves out of Freetown into the provinces.

Receiving police assistance can be difficult for the following reasons:

-Many local police stations do not have working telephones,

or they only have one telephone line, which is always in use.  
-The police officer answering the telephone has a difficult time understanding English. English is the official language, but Krio is widely spoken.  
-The police frequently claim to lack transportation to get to the scene of the incident;  
-When transportation is available, often times, fuel is not.  
The most visible police presence in Sierra Leone is the unarmed officers directing traffic and patrolling assigned areas on foot or motorcycle. Most SLP officers lack conventional police equipment (two-way radios, restraints, defensive weapons, flashlights, etc.) required to be effective in their jobs. While the abilities of the SLP are on par with some other West African nations, they do not compare to a U.S. police force in terms of capability, responsiveness or professionalism. Corruption remains a problem throughout the ranks of the SLP. The issue of low-pay and low morale creates an enabling environment in which even bribes of a few dollars are readily accepted. Historical tolerance of corruption throughout Sierra Leone breeds a complacent attitude towards ameliorating it within the police force.  
Travelers requiring police assistance are advised to contact them through the Joint Communications Center (JCC): 223-000, 220-069, 225-899/ 222-784, 221-025, 221-029. The JCC is best equipped to assist international travelers, and will either transfer the call or direct the traveler to the appropriate police division for assistance. The U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer (RSO) is also available to render assistance to American citizens requiring local police services. The RSO can be reached at (232-22) 515-000 during business hours or (232-22) 515-157 after hours.

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#### IV. Medical Emergencies:

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Medical facilities in Sierra Leone fall critically short of U.S. standards. Persons with serious medical conditions that require chronic medications or frequent treatment are discouraged from traveling to Sierra Leone. Most medications are in short supply, of inferior quality, or are fraudulent. The cleanliness of medical facilities and quality of treatment is unreliable. Unfortunately, cases of misdiagnosis, unavailable treatment and use of improper drugs are commonly reported.

All travelers to Sierra Leone are encouraged to purchase insurance to cover the medical expenses associated with a serious accident, injury or illness. This policy should include provisions for medical evacuation from the country.

FREETOWN 00000020 003 OF 004

Travelers are encouraged to see a medical doctor prior to travel to ensure that appropriate immunizations and precautions are given. Please refer to the Centers for Disease Control's website ([cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov)) for current recommendations specific to Sierra Leone.

#### Medical Facilities Point of Contacts:

Choithram Memorial Hospital: 232-598 or 076-608-987

Emergency Hospital Goderich, 076-611-386

Blue Shield Medical Services, 030-750-000

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#### VI. Travel Precautions:

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All American citizens are encouraged to register with the United States Embassy Consular Section. The U.S. Embassy is located on Leicester Peak Road in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Do not leave valuable items unsecured in your residence/quarters.

Do not carry more than you need, and only carry what you need in a secure place on your person. Pick-pocketing is common in Sierra Leone.

Do not walk on the beaches at night.

Do not invite strangers into your quarters.

Always keep the doors and windows to your residence or hotel room secured.

Do not keep excessive currency or other valuable items at your residence. It may attract the attention of criminals.

Do not attempt to use credit cards in Sierra Leone, even in ATM machines. Credit cards are generally not accepted at stores, restaurants, and hotels. Pay all bills in cash. Utilization of public transportation, including buses, taxis, and mopeds, is highly discouraged. Hiring a dedicated car and driver from a trusted and reliable source is recommended. Carefully protect all financial and personal information as incidents of financial fraud and identity theft crimes are increasing in Sierra Leone.

Practice good operational security if you are transporting valuable items into and around Sierra Leone. Some reported robberies committed against expatriates appear to have been carried out by persons with inside information regarding the victims.

Avoid wearing flashy jewelry, clothing or carrying expensive cameras, when walking around in public.

Ladies should avoid carrying purses, as they are enticing targets for criminals.

Be alert and aware of your surroundings at all times.

Be careful not to discuss travel plans or other business in a venue where others can overhear you.

Always ask for permission before taking a photograph. Local citizens may request a small fee for taking a picture of them or their surroundings. Do not photograph government buildings, military installations, airports, harbors or other locations/items with a potential security or intelligence interest. Cameras and film can be confiscated and never returned.

Do not respond to any unsolicited opportunities to make money, including business opportunities that seem too good to be true. Beware of offers to buy gold, diamonds, etc. These types of activities could result in a substantial loss of money or violation of local laws.

Do not purchase diamonds or other gems from an unlicensed source. The vast majority of diamond distributors in Sierra Leone are unlicensed and produce fraudulent gem certificates. Exercise caution when traveling through or conducting business in the East Side of Freetown. This is a high crime area, and should be avoided at night.

In the event an armed criminal confronts you, do not hesitate to give him what he wants.

When traveling in a vehicle, always keep your doors and windows locked and secured. Keep valuable items out of sight on the floor. Always keep adequate room between yourself and the vehicle in front of you to ensure you can maneuver in the event of a situation requiring escape from the area. Be aware of what is taking place outside of the vehicle. Always park in secure, well-lit locations. Do not pick up hitchhikers. If you are involved in a vehicular accident, it is important to be aware that a large crowd may gather at the scene which could become hostile and aggressive. If you are unable to remain calm and you fear for your safety, it is advised to immediately leave the scene and go to the nearest police station.

Local roads range from well-paved high-speed expressways to unpaved dirt trails. Regardless of road conditions, all travelers are advised to drive defensively and exercise caution. Many local vehicles fail to meet conventional safety standards and local motorists often show little regard or understanding of conventional traffic laws or etiquette. All American Citizens traveling to Sierra Leone are advised to refer to the U.S. Department of State Consular Information Sheet for additional useful information. This sheet provides information on a variety of issues intended to ensure your

FREETOWN 00000020 004 OF 004

trip to Sierra Leone is safe, trouble-free and uneventful.

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VII. Further Information:

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All Americans should register with the American Citizen Services when they arrive in Sierra Leone this can also be done on-line at <http://freetown.usembassy.gov>. The U.S. Embassy maintains a liaison with local law enforcement officials and is available to assist American citizens during their stay in Sierra Leone. The Consular Affairs and

Political section can be reached through the Embassy switchboard. The following contact information is being provided:

U.S. Embassy Freetown general number (232-22) 515-000  
The Regional Security Officer can be contacted (232-22) 515-140 during regular business hours.  
Medical Unit (232-22) 515-450  
Post One (232-22) 515-160 or 161  
E-Mail: Mannkc@state.gov or SopkoMR@state.gov.

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VIII. OSAC Country Council:

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The nearest OSAC Country Council is in Dakar, Senegal. The Regional Security Office in Freetown will provide country briefings for representative of American businesses and organization as requested.

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